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# Why the dichotomy ‘L1 versus L2 user’ is better than ‘native versus non-native speaker’<sup>1</sup>

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The debate on the concept of the native speaker and its use has been raging for decades and shows no sign of abating (Davies 2003, Kamhi-Stein 2016, Rampton 1990). Davies (2003) pointed out that applied linguists and foreign language teachers all use ‘the native speaker’ as a common sense reference point despite the fact that is hard to pin down who exactly is the native speaker (p. 1). He went on stating that the native speaker concept is highly dynamic and rich in ambiguity (p. 2). The term – or more specifically the uses to which it may be put – is potentially racist as it can be used to deliberately exclude speakers of certain varieties of a language or highly proficient non-native speakers (p. 8). Rampton (1990) noted that the criticism levelled at the concept of the native speaker had not stopped the use of the term and had not reduced its ‘mystical’ property. Llurda (2009) observed that despite the growing criticism of the concept of the native speaker, nothing much had changed: ‘The native speaker is under attack but I would dare say it still is in a pretty good shape’ (2009:48). The antonym of ‘native speaker’ is ‘non-native speaker’. This term is inherently strange. We define somebody by what s/he is not: do we categorise blue-eyed people as ‘not brown-eyed’? or left-handed people as ‘not right-handed’? The use of the term ‘non-native speaker’ does reveal a strong monolingual bias. This bias is without foundation because, as Mauranen (2012:4) argued, ‘Monolingualism is neither the typical condition nor the gold standard’.

Cook (1999) argued forcefully for a change in focus, shifting from native speakers in foreign language teaching to concentrate on **L2 users**. In later work he has defended L2 users as legitimate users of an L2 irrespective of the level of mastery of the L2. The L2 users are not defective monolingual native speakers or –even worse- failed native speakers. The term ‘L2 user’ refers to ‘people who know more than one language without the overtones that cloud the words *bilingual* and *learner*’ and who use the L2 minimally to maximally (Cook and Singleton 2014: 4). Moreover, L2 users are multi-competent. Murahata, Murahata and Cook (2016) pointed to the three basic premises of multi-competence:

1) ‘Multi-competence concerns the total system for all languages (L1, L2, Ln) in a single mind or community and their inter-relationships’ (p. 38). The authors argue that focusing solely on the L2 provides only part of the picture of that individual or community and that ignoring the L1 ‘reduces the study to quasi-L1 research, ignoring the very factor that makes SLA different – the possession of a first language (p. 38).

2) ‘Multi-competence does not depend on the monolingual native speaker’ (p. 38). The authors do not rule out comparisons between L2 user

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systems with monolingual native speakers but they emphasise the fact that the L2 user systems should not be seen as 'imperfect imitations of native speakers' (id).

3) 'Multi-competence affects the whole mind, i.e. all language and cognitive systems, rather than language alone' (p. 39). The authors define language as a complex system interacting with other cognitive systems. I have argued that this includes emotions, and that multi-competence also affects the emotional geography of individuals (Dewaele 2016a: 474).

Talking about L2 users rather than about non-native speakers was definitely a huge step forward for our discipline. The term 'user' is also more inclusive as it can include language signers or L2 readers or hearers (who don't necessarily speak or write the L2).

The term 'L2 user' was warmly welcomed (Cook 2002) but I started wondering about the potential for confusion linked to the use of the number '2'. The opposition is between monolinguals and people knowing second language(s). Can '2' also mean '3', '4', '5', '6'? The answer is 'yes' in Second Language Acquisition research where the label 'L2' has become an umbrella term for all 'foreign' languages (Mitchell and Myles 1998: 2). Growing interest in trilingualism and quadrilingualism has pushed for both broader and more fine-grained terms to refer to the users of languages acquired after the age of 3 (typically the boundary for **first** language acquisition). This means that if we discuss the third language that a person has acquired chronologically, it will be the L3, the fourth language of that person will be the L4 etc. I feel that 'L2(s)' is the wrong umbrella.

Rejecting the concept of native speaker, O'Rourke and Pujolar (2013), coming from a language revitalisation perspective, have proposed the label of 'new speaker' to refer to 'speakers which exist outside of the traditional native-speaker communities' (p. 56). While I applaud the initiative to move away from the deficiency model implied in the term 'non-native speaker', I fear that the label 'new' raises a serious semantic problem. Crucially, at what point does a 'new speaker' cease to be new? Moreover, how fair is it to label somebody who has been using a language for 50 years as a 'new speaker' of that language?

In order to avoid confusion, I have suggested using the label 'LX', meaning **any** foreign language acquired after the age at which the first language(s) were acquired, i.e. after the age of three, to any level of proficiency. It is then possible to be either specific and compare the person's L2, L3 or L4, or to make a more global statement about the person's LXs. The assumption is that the L1(s) will have more in common because of the early age at which they have been acquired compared to the LX(s), which in turn will have more common characteristics. The advantage of the label 'LX' is that it is value-neutral. In other words, it has no connotation of inferiority and it could refer to any number of LXs acquired and forgotten in various ways and to various degrees.

Another crucial aspect in the dichotomy native versus LX users is that the latter are by definition also native speakers of L1(s) (cf. Murahata et al.'s 2016 first premise). However, the label 'native speaker' is not only problematic in the sense that Davies, Cook, O'Rourke and Pujolar pointed out, it is potentially misleading because it implies a very high level of proficiency. Cook (1999) pointed out that the only indisputable element in the definition of 'native speaker' is that it refers to a person who speaks 'the language learnt first; the

other characteristics are incidental, describing how well an individual uses the language' (p. 187). This makes perfect sense, because as Schmid (2011) has shown, native speakers can lose their L1 through a process of attrition. This loss of L1 proficiency does not affect their status of native speakers of the language. Moreover, variation within native speakers can be huge: some can be highly educated while other can be illiterate; some may possess a very large mental lexicon while others may have a much smaller one. On top of that they can be speakers of different varieties and dialects (Cook and Singleton 2014: 138). Finally, in one of their celebrated studies on the Critical Period Hypothesis, Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam (2008:491) found that not all fluent native speakers even pass as native speakers (2 out of a control group of 20 did not get a unanimous vote from 10 native listeners), which makes the construct even more problematic.

I have thus argued that it would make more sense to talk about **L1 users** of a language rather than **native speakers**. Being a L1 user usually means a high level of proficiency in this language but it is not inherent in the label. Moreover, a L1 user is typically also a LX user, a crucial point if we compare LX users with L1 users. We could compare quadrilinguals in their French L3 with quadrilingual French L1 users for example. In other words, we do not use monolinguals as controls but other multilinguals with different language profiles. This is a point made by Cook and Singleton (2014) who argued that the monolingual native speaker is an abstraction and therefore not be a role model for the L2 user. The term 'LX user' does not imply any level of proficiency, which means it could range from minimal to maximal and could very well be equal or superior to that of L1 users in certain domains.

Drawing on research on the differences in emotionality and embodiment of multilinguals' L1(s) and LX(s) (Dewaele 2013; Pavlenko 2012), I have carried out comparisons of 1159 English L1 and 1165 English LX users' understanding, perception of offensiveness and self-reported frequency of use of negative emotion-laden English words (Dewaele 2016b). Both groups were multilingual, so I was not comparing apples with pears. English LX users were found, unexpectedly, to rate the offensiveness of nearly all the words significantly higher and to use the most offensive words less frequently than the English L1 users. A follow-up study focused on the L1 users of American English residing inside and outside the US showed that speaking two varieties of the same language has consequences on the semantic representations of four typical British and four typical American words (Dewaele to appear). One of the unexpected findings was the effect of multilingualism on the semantic representations of the words of British origin. The semantic representations of typical British words of more multilingual American English L1 users differed from their fellow Americans with fewer languages. I argued that having multiple languages in the mind increases the variability of elements at the periphery of the L1 system, which could be interpreted as evidence of cognitive restructuring, a phenomenon linked to the first premise of multi-competence (Murahata et al 2016).

Table 1: From native/non-native speaker to L1/LX user

Traditional dichotomy:	native speaker	non-native speaker
Cook's innovation:	native speaker	L2 user
Present proposal:	L1 user	LX user

To sum up, the traditional dichotomy, 'native' versus 'non-native speaker' has to be rejected because of the inherent ideological assumptions about the superiority of the former and the inferiority of the latter. The substitution of 'non-native speaker' by 'L2 user' represented a big step forward in creating a more balanced dichotomy but it kept the first part, namely the term 'native speaker' - though not necessarily a monolingual one (see premise 2 in Murahata et al. 2016). The present contribution argues that the final step should be the substitution of 'native speaker' by 'L1 user' (see table 1). The dichotomy 'L1 user' versus 'LX user' does not imply that one is superior to the other. They are equal and can be complementary. It also suggests that variation can exist within both L1(s) and LX(s) and that **all** individuals can be multicompetent users of multiple languages.

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